JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

LEADERSHIP SILENCE LATENCY: A NOVEL CONSTRUCT FOR EXPLAINING EMPLOYEE TRUST RECOVERY IN ORGANISATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Muhammad Ali Khan[*1], Dr. kalèem ullah[2], Mohsin shakoor khokar[3], Uzair Soomro[4], Wasif khan khattak[5], Tanzeela khan[6]

[*1]*Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering Riphah International University I-14, Islamabad Pakistan*
[2]*PhD Research Scholar*
[3]*Registration Section Comsats University Lahore*
[4] *Management Science Business analytics at international Islamic university Islamabad*
[5]*BBA kiya hy department of Management Science DHA Suffa University*
[6]*University NUML Department English language and litrature*

[*1]alirohilla@gmail.com, [2]kaleemullah@cuilahore.edu.pk [3]mohsinkhokhar715@gmail.com, [4]uzairsoomro76@gmail.com, [5]wasif687526@gmail.com, [6]tanzeelakhankhan07@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22811852

Keywords
Leadership silence latency; crisis communication; strategic ambiguity; trust recovery; crisis leadership; organisational silence; artificial intelligence failure; cross-cultural communication; response timing

Article History
Received: 01 June 2026
Accepted: 23 August 2026
Published: 17 September 2026

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *
Muhammad Ali Khan

Abstract

Crisis communication scholarship has grown substantially, generating extensive knowledge about what leaders should say during organisational crises, most notably through the long-running debate between transparency and strategic ambiguity as competing message strategies. Yet this literature has largely overlooked an important dimension of leader behaviour that has been neither conceptually developed nor empirically tested: the timing of leader communication, that is, the interval during which a leader remains silent before speaking. This article introduces Leadership Silence Latency (LSL), a new latent construct describing the duration and placement of a leader's non-response during an unfolding organisational crisis. Rather than treating silence as an empty interval that precedes "real" communication, LSL conceptualises silence itself as a communicative act, one capable of shaping the stakeholder trust trajectory independently of, and in interaction with, whatever message eventually follows. We propose a four-phase research programme: conceptual work that distinguishes leader-attributed from organisation-attributed silence; a multi-sector case corpus study coding real crisis timelines across corporate, healthcare, and education settings for trust, reputation, and sentiment outcomes as continuous trajectories rather than pre/post snapshots; a controlled experimental study that manipulates silence duration, attribution, and crisis type, including AI-failure crises; and a cross-cultural moderation study testing whether high-context and low-context communication norms shape whether silence is read as respectful deliberation or as evasion. Together, these four phases supply the three components reviewers typically require to certify a genuinely new theoretical contribution: a new construct, a new

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

measurement approach, and a specified set of boundary conditions. We close with the anticipated theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of the LSL framework, including an evidence-based model for how leaders and organisations might strategically manage silence during a crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

When an organisation faces a crisis, attention turns almost immediately to its leaders. Employees, customers, regulators, journalists, and the wider public look to the people at the top for information, reassurance, and evidence that the situation is under control. Decades of crisis communication research have examined what a leader should say once they begin to speak, typically framing the choice as a continuum running from transparency to strategic ambiguity. Transparency-oriented approaches hold that openness and candour limit reputational damage and preserve stakeholder confidence, while strategic-ambiguity approaches counter that a degree of imprecision can preserve organisational flexibility, limit legal exposure, and avoid escalating an already volatile situation.

This emphasis on message content is well justified. Coombs's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), together with the earlier experimental work of Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2002), has given practitioners an evidence-based vocabulary for matching response strategy to crisis type and perceived responsibility, and Benoit's (1995, 1997) image restoration theory has supplied a parallel account of the rhetorical options available once an organisation decides to speak. Eisenberg's (1984) foundational treatment of strategic ambiguity further clarified how imprecision in message content can serve legitimate organisational goals. Collectively, these frameworks have produced a mature, well-validated body of guidance for what leaders should say during a crisis.

What this literature has not systematically addressed is the period before the message: the interval in which a leader says nothing at all. Existing treatments of pre-response delay generally frame it as a logistical or procedural matter, a function of legal review, fact-finding, or organisational unpreparedness, rather than as a communicative act with its own signalling value. Yet stakeholders rarely experience silence as an absence of information. In the absence of a leadership voice, employees, customers, and other observers actively construct inferences about competence, honesty, care, and control, filling the informational vacuum with their own interpretations (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). The length of a leader's non-response during a crisis, together with where in the unfolding timeline that non-response falls, therefore functions as an independently measurable communicative signal, one that can operate alongside, and even apart from, the content of whatever message eventually follows. This article names and formalises that signal as Leadership Silence Latency (LSL).

The stakes of this timing question have arguably intensified in recent years. Social media has compressed the window within which stakeholders expect an organisational response, shifting norms about what counts as an acceptable delay (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013), while the emergence of artificial-intelligence failures, incidents in which an algorithm rather than a person is the proximate cause of harm, has introduced a class of crises for which no established communication playbook yet exists (Loof, Ehlers, Lobo Paes, Haider, & Spinks, 2023). Both developments make the question of how long, and under what attribution, a leader can remain silent before trust erodes a practically urgent one, not merely a theoretical curiosity.

This article pursues four objectives. First, Section 2 situates the conceptual problem that LSL is designed to address within the wider crisis communication, organisational silence, and trust-repair literatures. Second, Sections 3

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

and 4 precisely define LSL and distinguish it from constructs with which it might be confused, most notably strategic ambiguity and organisational silence. Third, Section 6 lays out a four-phase research agenda, moving from conceptualisation through case-based observation, controlled experimentation, and cross-cultural boundary testing, designed to establish the predictive validity of LSL for employee trust recovery. Fourth, Sections 7 through 9 specify the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions this programme is positioned to make. In combination, the paper aims to contribute a new construct, a replicable measurement approach, and a set of empirically testable boundary conditions to the study of crisis leadership communication.

Literature Review

The conceptual case for Leadership Silence Latency rests on eight bodies of scholarship that, to date, have developed largely independently of one another. This section reviews each in turn before synthesising, in Section 2.10, the specific omission that motivates the present research programme.

2.1 Crisis Communication and Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Contemporary crisis communication scholarship is anchored by Coombs's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which proposes that the reputational threat posed by a crisis depends on the type of crisis (victim, accidental, or preventable), the organisation's crisis history, and its prior relational reputation, and that response strategies should be matched to the resulting level of attributed responsibility. SCCT builds on earlier experimental work by Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2002), which demonstrated that stakeholder attributions of responsibility mediate the relationship between crisis type and reputational outcomes, and it has since become one of the two most frequently cited frameworks in the field, alongside Benoit's image restoration theory. A consistent finding across this literature is that once a leader does speak, strategies that accept responsibility and offer corrective action tend to outperform denial or diminishment strategies when the organisation's culpability is high (Coombs, 2007). This body of work has produced clear, well-validated guidance about what an organisation should say during a crisis. It has, however, been built almost entirely around variation in message content; the interval of non-response that precedes any message is treated as a background condition rather than as a variable with its own reputational consequences.

2.2 Image Repair and Apologia Theory

A parallel content-focused tradition is Benoit's (1995, 1997) image restoration theory, which catalogues the rhetorical strategies, denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, available to an individual or organisation whose reputation has been publicly challenged. Image restoration theory shares SCCT's assumption that communication is a goal-directed activity oriented toward the maintenance of a favourable reputation, and the two frameworks are often treated as complementary, with SCCT considered better suited to organisational crises and image restoration theory to crises involving named individuals. Like SCCT, however, image restoration theory begins its analysis at the moment a message is produced. Neither framework offers a principled account of the interval that precedes that moment, despite the fact that, as this review shows, that interval is already treated as consequential in adjacent literatures on trust repair and crisis-response timing.

2.3 Strategic Ambiguity in Organisational Communication

Eisenberg's (1984) treatment of strategic ambiguity supplies the conceptual vocabulary most often invoked to describe deliberate imprecision in crisis messaging. Eisenberg argued that ambiguous communication can serve legitimate organisational functions, preserving privileged relationships, facilitating

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

change, and maintaining interpretive latitude, functions that a fully transparent message might foreclose. Strategic ambiguity has since become the default lens through which crisis communication scholars analyse departures from full disclosure. Because LSL and strategic ambiguity both describe departures from immediate, unambiguous transparency, the two constructs are easily conflated. However, strategic ambiguity is a property of message content: it describes how clearly or vaguely a leader assigns cause, responsibility, or next steps once a message is delivered. It says nothing about how long the leader waited before delivering that message, or about who, the leader personally or the organisation as a whole, stakeholders hold responsible for the wait. Section 4.2 formalises this distinction, which is foundational to the conceptual contribution of the present article.

2.4 Organisational and Employee Silence

A separate body of scholarship, largely disconnected from the crisis communication literature reviewed above, has examined silence as an organisational phenomenon in its own right. Morrison and Milliken's (2000) foundational article on organisational silence argued that the systematic withholding of information about potential problems is not merely an aggregation of individual choices but a collective, organisationally produced pattern, driven by structural and cultural forces such as centralised decision-making and a climate in which negative feedback is implicitly discouraged. Building on this top-down account, Pinder and Harlos (2001) and Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003) developed complementary, more individually focused conceptualisations, distinguishing acquiescent silence (withholding driven by resignation), defensive silence (withholding driven by fear), and prosocial silence (withholding intended to benefit the organisation or a colleague). Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) extended this work empirically, documenting the specific issues, from concerns about competence to disagreements with organisational decisions, that employees most often choose not to raise with their supervisors, while Edmondson's (1999) research on psychological safety demonstrated that a team's shared belief about whether it is safe to speak up predicts whether employees voice concerns at all. Zaremba (2010) later synthesised much of this literature for a practitioner audience under the heading of organisational silence as a hidden threat to organisational recovery.

This literature establishes, convincingly, that silence is a meaningful organisational variable with measurable antecedents and consequences. Its focus, however, is almost entirely upward and internal: it examines why employees remain silent toward their superiors about problems inside the organisation. It does not examine the reverse, outward-facing case that is the subject of the present article, namely a leader's silence toward employees, customers, and other stakeholders during an unfolding crisis. Nonetheless, the organisational silence literature's central insight, that silence is actively interpreted rather than passively unnoticed, transfers directly to the leadership context and motivates much of the present construct's theoretical grounding.

2.5 Trust, Trust Violations, and Trust Repair

A third relevant literature examines how trust is damaged and subsequently repaired following a violation. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks (2004) showed experimentally that the optimal response to a trust violation depends on its type: apology tends to repair trust more effectively than denial following competence-based violations, whereas denial can outperform apology following integrity-based violations, particularly when the evidence of wrongdoing is ambiguous. Kim, Dirks, Cooper, and Ferrin (2006) extended this work by showing that whether an apology is framed with an internal or external attribution further moderates its effectiveness, again differently for competence- and integrity-based violations. Most directly relevant to the present article, Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, and Dirks (2007) explicitly tested reticence, remaining silent rather than apologising or denying, as a response option following a trust violation, and

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

found that its effectiveness relative to apology and denial likewise depended on violation type. This is, to the authors' knowledge, the closest existing empirical precedent for treating silence itself as a discrete, manipulable response strategy with measurable consequences for trust. The trust-repair literature nonetheless differs from the present research programme in two important respects. First, it has been conducted almost exclusively at the interpersonal level, using dyadic trust-violation scenarios rather than organisational crises unfolding over days or weeks in public view. Second, and more importantly for present purposes, it has treated silence as a discrete response option selected instead of speech, typically instantiated as a single-trial manipulation, rather than as a continuous variable of duration and placement that can precede any eventual response, whatever that response turns out to be. LSL reconceives silence not as an alternative to the message but as a temporal property that exists prior to, and independently of, whatever message is ultimately delivered, whether that message apologises, denies, or explains.

2.6 Timing, Speed, and Response Latency in Crisis Communication

A smaller stream of crisis communication research has examined the speed of an organisation's response as a variable in its own right. Sturges (1994) distinguished instructing information, which tells stakeholders what to do to protect themselves, from adjusting and internalising information, and argued that instructing information in particular loses value rapidly with delay. Subsequent studies have generally confirmed that faster responses are associated with more favourable stakeholder outcomes, though the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions remain under-specified. Utz, Schultz, and Glocka (2013), for instance, examined public reactions to the Fukushima Daiichi disaster and found that medium and crisis type interacted with emotional reactions to shape public response, underscoring that timing effects are unlikely to operate uniformly across contexts. This literature comes closer than any reviewed so far to the present article's concerns, since it treats the interval before a response as a variable rather than a background condition. It nonetheless differs from the LSL programme in three respects. First, it has generally operationalised timing coarsely, as a categorical contrast between fast and slow response, rather than as a continuously measured latency variable coded against the specific timeline of a given crisis. Second, it has not distinguished whether stakeholders attribute a delay to the leader personally or to the organisation as a whole, a distinction that blame-attribution research (Kim et al., 2004, 2006) suggests should matter a great deal. Third, it has not modelled trust recovery as a trajectory unfolding over multiple time points, relying instead on single post-response measurements. The four-phase programme proposed in Section 6 is designed explicitly to address each of these three gaps.

2.7 Cross-Cultural Communication: High- and Low-Context Cultures

Because the interpretation of silence is unlikely to be culturally uniform, the present article also draws on Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication cultures. In high-context cultures, meaning is conveyed substantially through shared context, relationship, and nonverbal cues, and a pause before speaking may be read as a sign of deliberation, respect, or appropriate gravity. In low-context cultures, where meaning is expected to reside primarily in explicit verbal content, the same pause is more likely to be read as evasion, incompetence, or a lack of concern. Hofstede's (2001) complementary dimensional model of national culture, and in particular the uncertainty-avoidance dimension, further suggests that cultures differing in their tolerance for ambiguity may also differ in how much latency they are willing to tolerate before a leader's silence begins to erode trust. Neither Hall's nor Hofstede's frameworks were developed with organisational crisis silence specifically in mind, but both offer a well-validated theoretical basis for treating cultural

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

context as a boundary condition on LSL's effects, which Phase 4 of the proposed research programme (Section 6.4) is designed to test directly.

2.8 Emerging Context: AI-Mediated and Algorithmic Crisis Communication

A final, rapidly growing literature examines crises triggered by artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems, a context that did not meaningfully exist when SCCT, image restoration theory, and strategic ambiguity theory were first developed. Loof, Ehlers, Lobo Paes, Haider, and Spinks (2023) examined public perceptions of AI as a crisis communication source and found that stakeholder trust responses to AI-mediated messages differ from responses to human-delivered messages, while other recent work has documented that organisations facing AI-failure crises frequently default to blaming the technology or a third-party vendor rather than accepting direct responsibility, a pattern that departs from the accountability-first guidance long associated with effective crisis response. Because AI-failure crises are novel, they lack the established communication norms and stakeholder expectations that shape responses to more familiar crisis types such as product recalls or safety incidents. This absence of precedent may itself affect how long organisations take to respond, and how that delay is interpreted, making AI failure a theoretically important boundary condition for LSL rather than merely a topical addition. Phase 3 of the proposed research programme accordingly manipulates crisis type to include an AI-failure condition, allowing a direct test of whether LSL effects are amplified in contexts where communication norms are still unsettled.

2.9 Rumour, Uncertainty, and the Informational Vacuum

A final relevant literature explains why silence is unlikely to be experienced as a neutral absence of information. Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory proposes that individuals are strongly motivated to reduce uncertainty about others' behaviour and will actively seek information, including inference from indirect cues, when direct information is unavailable. DiFonzo and Bordia's (2007) programme of research on rumour extends this logic to organisational settings, showing that rumour functions as a form of collective sensemaking that fills informational vacuums, and that the volume and negativity of rumour tend to increase with the ambiguity and importance of the situation, precisely the conditions that characterise an unfolding organisational crisis. Taken together, this literature predicts that a period of leadership silence during a crisis will not be experienced by stakeholders as a blank interval but as an active prompt for uncertainty-driven inference and rumour, providing a psychological mechanism through which LSL may exert an effect on trust independent of the content of any subsequent message.

2.10 Synthesis: The Literature Review Gap

Read together, these eight literatures converge on a striking omission. Crisis communication research (Sections 2.1 to 2.3) has produced a mature account of what leaders should say but treats the period before they say it as a logistical precondition rather than a communicative variable. Organisational silence research (Section 2.4) has produced a mature account of upward, internal silence but has not been extended to downward, outward-facing leader silence during crises. Trust-repair research (Section 2.5) has shown that silence can be manipulated and measured as a response option, but only as a discrete alternative to speech rather than a continuous temporal variable, and only in interpersonal rather than organisational-crisis settings. Crisis-timing research (Section 2.6) has shown that response speed matters but has not isolated attribution or modelled trust as a trajectory. Cross-cultural (Section 2.7) and uncertainty and rumour (Section 2.9) research supply theoretical mechanisms, respectively a boundary condition and a psychological process, that have not yet been connected to crisis silence specifically. And AI-failure research (Section 2.8) identifies an emerging crisis context with no established

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

communication playbook, for which the timing question is especially unresolved. Leadership Silence Latency is proposed as the construct that draws these separate threads together into a single, testable research programme, formalised in Section 4 and operationalised in Section 6.

3. Problem Statement and Identified Gap

3.1 The Problem: A Content-Only View of Crisis Communication

The dominant question in the crisis leadership communication literature can be summarised as: under a crisis of a given type and intensity, what should a leader say? Research in this tradition compares transparent communication with ambiguous or evasive communication and examines the consequences for trust, blame attribution, and organisational reputation (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This paradigm has produced useful, widely applicable advice, but it implicitly assumes that communication begins at the moment a leader starts speaking. All of the time that precedes that moment, whether hours, days, or weeks, is treated as pre-communicative: preparation time, legal review, or organisational lag, rather than a period that stakeholders are actively decoding in real time.

3.2 The Gap: Silence as an Unstudied Independent Signal

This produces a specific and identifiable gap. No existing construct isolates the duration and placement of a leader's non-response as an independent predictor of crisis communication outcomes. It remains unknown whether silence followed by an ambiguous message produces different trust outcomes than an ambiguous message followed by a comparable period of silence; whether the effect of silence differs depending on whether stakeholders attribute the delay to the leader personally or to the organisation as a whole; and whether the interpretation of silence shifts across cultural contexts with differing norms of directness and deliberation (Section 2.7). Addressing this gap requires a construct designed specifically to isolate the occurrence and location of non-response from the content that eventually follows it; as the review in Section 2 demonstrates, no existing construct in the literature currently has this capability.

4. Introducing Leadership Silence Latency (LSL)

Leadership Silence Latency is defined as the latent period and location of a leader's non-response to an emerging organisational crisis. LSL takes silence itself, rather than the message that eventually breaks it, as its unit of analysis. This shift is deliberate: it reframes the research question from "what did the leader say?" to "what did the leader's silence communicate, and for how long did it last?"

4.1 What Makes This Genuinely New

Six features distinguish LSL from existing constructs in the crisis communication literature.

- Naming a previously unnamed phenomenon. Strategic ambiguity has long described imprecision in message content (Eisenberg, 1984). No named construct in the literature currently captures the duration of leader silence as an independent signal concerning not what is said, but when, or whether, anything is said at all.
- Silence as an active signal, not a passive gap. Rather than treating delay as a neutral prelude to the "real" communicative act, LSL treats the length and placement of a pause as an independent predictor of trust recovery, consistent with the uncertainty-driven sensemaking documented by Berger and Calabrese (1975) and DiFonzo and Bordia (2007).
- An explicit attribution split. The framework distinguishes leader-attributed silence, in which stakeholders hold a specific, identifiable individual responsible for the delay, from organisation-attributed silence, in which stakeholders perceive the delay as systemic or institutional. This distinction, motivated by the attribution research reviewed in Section 2.5 (Kim et al., 2004, 2006), has not previously been isolated and tested as a moderator of crisis communication outcomes.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

- Trajectory over snapshot. Trust recovery is measured through repeated observations over time rather than a single pre/post comparison, allowing the shape and pace of recovery, not merely its final level, to be captured (see Section 6.3).
- Extension to AI-failure crises. The framework is deliberately extended to cover AI-failure crises, a context that, as Section 2.8 shows, is not yet covered by an established organisational crisis communication playbook.
- A cross-cultural boundary condition. Drawing on Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2001), the framework treats the interpretation of silence, as respectful deliberation in high-context cultures or as evasion in low-context cultures, as a specified, testable boundary condition rather than assuming a culturally universal effect.

Together, these six elements position the construct to satisfy the criteria reviewers and examiners typically use to certify genuine theoretical novelty, namely a new construct, a new measurement approach, and specified boundary conditions, rather than a merely incremental extension of the existing transparency-versus-ambiguity literature.

4.2 Distinguishing LSL from Strategic Ambiguity

Because LSL and strategic ambiguity both describe departures from full, immediate transparency, a precise distinction between them is necessary. Strategic ambiguity concerns the content of a message: the extent to which that message is clear or unclear about cause, responsibility, or next steps once it has been delivered (Eisenberg, 1984). LSL concerns the timing and placement of that message: how long a leader waits before delivering any message, whether ambiguous or transparent, and whether stakeholders attribute that wait to the leader or to the organisation. In principle, a leader could exhibit low LSL (a fast response) combined with high strategic ambiguity (a vague message), or high LSL (a slow response) combined with low strategic ambiguity (an eventually candid message). Because these two dimensions are conceptually independent, neither can be reduced to, or inferred from, the other, and each therefore needs to be operationalised in its own right. The research programme in Section 6 is designed to do exactly that, and Figure 1 summarises the resulting conceptual model.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE

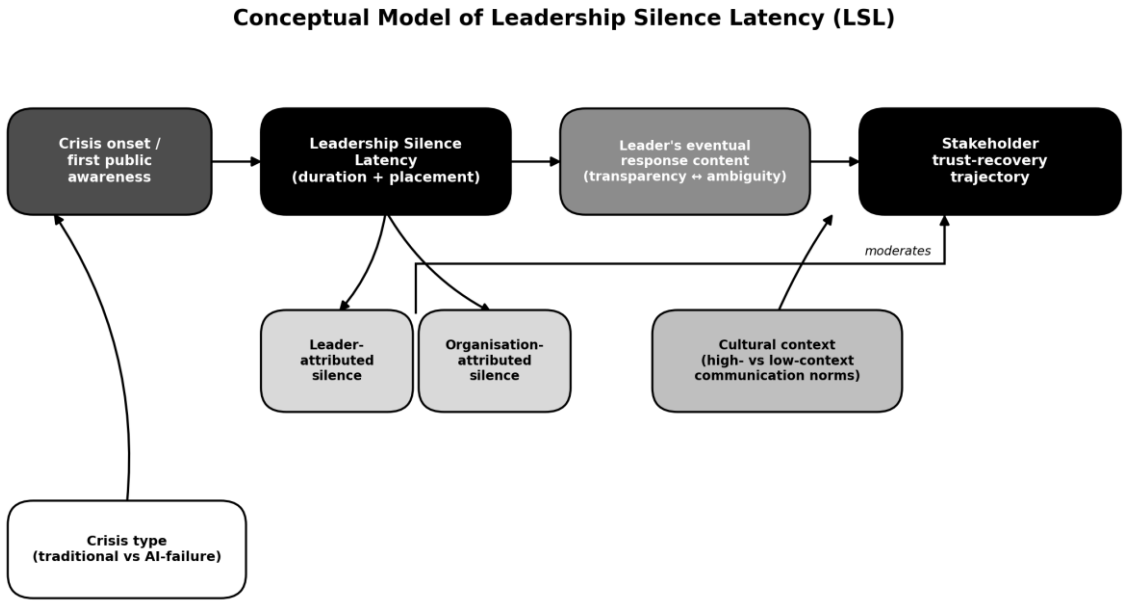


Figure 1. Conceptual model of Leadership Silence Latency, showing the attribution split, the crisis-type and cultural-context boundary conditions, and the pathway to the stakeholder trust-recovery trajectory.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

5. Theoretical Positioning

LSL is best understood not as a replacement for existing crisis communication theory but as an extension and refinement of it. Once a leader speaks, SCCT and related content-focused frameworks remain the appropriate lens for understanding how message strategy should be matched to crisis type and attributed responsibility (Coombs, 2007). LSL adds a temporal and structural layer to this content-based theory, proposing that trust recovery is jointly a function of what is said and how long stakeholders waited to hear it. This positions LSL as complementary to, rather than competitive with, existing crisis communication theory: it can be introduced into current models and tested as an independent variable within them.

The attribution split at the centre of the LSL framework, leader-attributed versus organisation-attributed silence, links the construct directly to the trust-repair and attribution literature reviewed in Section 2.5. Kim and colleagues' (2004, 2006) demonstration that the internal or external framing of an attribution moderates the effectiveness of a trust-repair response suggests, by close analogy, that whether a delay is attributed internally (to the leader) or externally (to the organisation as a system) should likewise moderate how damaging that delay turns out to be. The cross-cultural moderation proposed in Phase 4 (Section 6.4) further links LSL to Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (2001) high-context/low-context communication scholarship, while the theoretical mechanism through which silence is presumed to affect trust, active stakeholder inference in the absence of information, draws directly on Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory and DiFonzo and Bordia's (2007) rumour research. In each case, LSL is positioned within, rather than at the periphery of, an existing and well-validated theoretical tradition, which is precisely what allows its predictions to be derived from, and tested against, established theory rather than asserted independently of it.

6. Research Design: A Four-Phase Program

Moving LSL from a theoretically grounded construct to an empirically validated one requires a staged progression from definition, to observation, to controlled testing, to boundary specification. We propose a four-phase research programme combining conceptual, observational, experimental, and cross-cultural methods, summarised in Table 1 and detailed in the subsections that follow.

Table 1. Overview of the four-phase LSL research programme

Phase 1	Conceptualisation	Define LSL as duration plus placement of leader non-response; formally distinguish leader-attributed from organisation-attributed silence.
Phase 2	Case Corpus Study	Collect real crisis timelines across corporate, healthcare, and education sectors; code silence intervals against trust, reputation, and sentiment outcomes.
Phase 3	Experimental Study	Manipulate silence duration (short vs. long), attribution

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

		(leader-absent vs. organisation-delayed), and crisis type (AI-failure vs. traditional); measure trust-recovery trajectories via repeated measures.
Phase 4	Cross-Cultural Moderation	Test whether high-context versus low-context cultural norms moderate how silence is interpreted (respectful deliberation vs. evasion).

6.1 Phase 1: Conceptualisation

The first phase establishes the conceptual groundwork for the remaining empirical work. It results in a formal, dual operationalisation of LSL: duration, the elapsed time between the onset of the crisis, or the public's first awareness of it, and the leader's first substantive communicative response; and placement, the position of that response relative to key milestones in the crisis timeline, such as first recognition by the media, by internal employees, or by regulators. This phase also codifies the attribution split introduced in Section 4, distinguishing leader-attributed silence, in which stakeholders believe a specific, identifiable leader is responsible for the delay, from organisation-attributed silence, in which stakeholders perceive the delay as systemic or institutional. This distinction is treated as a moderating variable throughout the subsequent phases, since prior attribution research indicates that stakeholders respond differently when blame is assigned to an individual rather than to an institution (Kim et al., 2004, 2006). The coding manual presents the resulting operational definitions and candidate measurement indicators in full.

6.1.1 From Definition to Coding: Bridging Phase 1 and Phase 2

Because Phase 2 depends on coders being able to apply the duration and placement definitions consistently to messy, real-world timelines, Phase 1 also produces a decision-rule codebook specifying how ambiguous cases should be handled. Two categories of ambiguity are anticipated and addressed in advance. The first concerns partial responses: brief holding statements, such as an acknowledgement that an incident is "under review", that fall short of a substantive response. The codebook specifies that such statements do not stop the duration clock unless they include at least one of the three elements the Phase 1 definition treats as substantive: an acknowledgement of the crisis's occurrence, an indication of leader or organisational awareness, or a commitment to a concrete next step. The second concerns multi-leader organisations, in which more than one senior figure may speak at different points; the codebook specifies that duration is coded from the first statement attributable to anyone occupying a formal leadership role relevant to the crisis, while placement and attribution are coded separately for each subsequent statement, allowing the corpus to capture cases in which, for example, a functional leader speaks quickly while the chief executive remains silent for considerably longer.

6.2 Phase 2: Case Corpus Study

The second phase provides bottom-up empirical grounding through the construction of a real-world crisis dataset drawn from corporate, healthcare, and education organisations. For each case, researchers will reconstruct a timeline documenting crisis onset, every instance and absence of leader communication, and the duration and placement of any silence interval. These intervals will then be mapped onto

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

publicly observable outcome measures, including employee trust (where survey or internal-communication data are available), media sentiment, analyst and regulatory commentary, and public sentiment drawn from social and news media. A target corpus of approximately 40 to 60 cases, distributed roughly evenly across the three sectors and supplemented, where feasible, with a smaller subsample of AI-failure incidents, is proposed to provide adequate variation in silence duration for the descriptive and correlational analyses in this phase. Two trained coders will independently code each timeline against a structured coding protocol, with inter-coder reliability assessed using Cohen's kappa and a target threshold of at least .75 prior to full-corpus coding. This phase serves two functions: it establishes the ecological validity of the LSL construct by demonstrating that measurable, meaningfully varying silence intervals exist in real crises, and it produces descriptive patterns, such as typical silence duration by sector or crisis type, that will inform the design of the controlled experiment in Phase 3.

6.2.1 Data Sources and Analytical Approach

Candidate data sources for the Phase 2 corpus include contemporaneous news coverage, regulatory filings and statements, organisational press releases and internal communications where publicly disclosed, and archived social media activity from the organisation's official channels and from verified stakeholder accounts. Where an organisation's own internal employee-trust survey data are available, for example through published engagement-survey results or disclosures made in subsequent litigation or regulatory proceedings, these will be incorporated as a direct trust measure; where they are not, media sentiment and public sentiment indices will serve as proxy outcome measures, consistent with common practice in the crisis communication literature reviewed in Section 2.6. Once coded, the corpus will support two complementary analyses: a descriptive analysis characterising the distribution of silence duration and placement by sector and crisis type, which will directly inform the manipulation anchors used in Phase 3 (see Section 6.5); and a correlational analysis relating silence duration, placement, and attribution to the available outcome trajectories, using time-series or panel regression methods appropriate to the irregular observation intervals typical of naturally occurring case data. Because the corpus is observational, these correlational analyses are understood as hypothesis-generating rather than as providing causal evidence, a limitation addressed directly through the controlled manipulation introduced in Phase 3.

6.3 Phase 3: Experimental Study

The third phase moves from observation to controlled testing. A factorial experimental design will manipulate three variables: silence duration (short vs. long delay before the leader's response), attribution of silence (leader-absent vs. organisation-delayed), and crisis type (AI-failure vs. a traditional crisis type such as a product recall or safety incident), yielding an eight-cell 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design. Participants will be presented with a simulated crisis scenario embodying one combination of these manipulations, with manipulation checks administered immediately after exposure to confirm that participants correctly perceived the intended duration, attribution, and crisis type. Trust in leadership will then be assessed at multiple time points following the simulated response, producing a trust-recovery trajectory for each participant rather than a single before-and-after score. This repeated-measures design, analysed using mixed-effects or latent growth-curve modelling, will allow the programme to examine not only whether the eventual level of trust recovery is shaped by silence duration and attribution, but also whether the speed and shape of recovery differ, for instance, whether long silences produce a lower but more gradual and less stable recovery curve over time, consistent with the illustrative pattern in Figure 2. Including AI failure as a manipulated crisis type will allow a direct test of whether LSL effects are amplified in a context for which stakeholders have not yet developed settled communication expectations.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

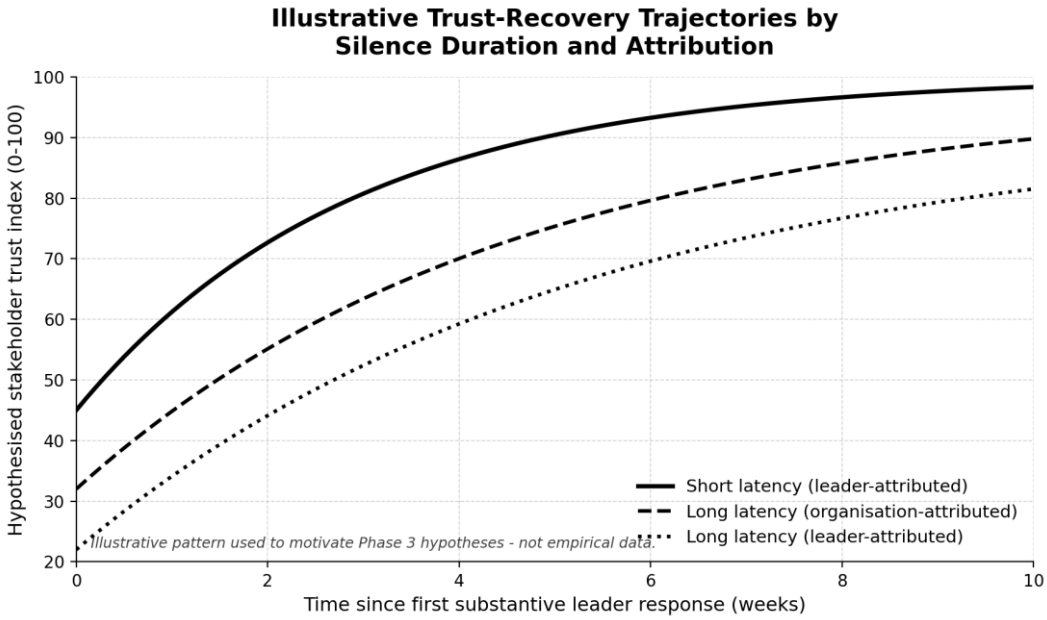


Figure 2. Illustrative hypothesised trust-recovery trajectories under short versus long silence latency and leader- versus organisation-attributed delay. These curves are conceptual, generated to motivate the Phase 3 hypotheses; they are not empirical results.

6.3.1 Sampling and Statistical Power

An eight-cell between-subjects design of this kind requires a sample sized to detect not only main effects but also the two- and three-way interactions central to the LSL hypotheses, since the theoretical claim that attribution and crisis type moderate the effect of duration is itself an interaction hypothesis. A priori power analysis, assuming a small-to-medium effect size consistent with prior crisis-communication experiments (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Kim et al., 2004) and a conventional alpha of .05 with power of .80, is expected to require a minimum of approximately 40 participants per cell, or roughly 320 participants in total, with recruitment oversampled to accommodate anticipated exclusions following manipulation-check failures. Participants will be recruited from working-age adults with some prior exposure to organisational employment, on the reasoning that the trust judgments of interest are most meaningful among stakeholders with lived experience of organisational leadership.

6.3.2 Measures

Beyond the repeated trust measure described above, the Phase 3 protocol includes manipulation-check items confirming perceived silence duration, perceived attribution, and perceived crisis type; a short measure of perceived leader competence and perceived leader integrity, allowing the study to test whether LSL effects operate similarly on these two established dimensions of trust (Kim et al., 2004); and an open-ended item inviting participants to explain their trust rating, providing qualitative data that can be used to probe the uncertainty-driven inference mechanism proposed in Section 2.9.

6.4 Phase 4: Cross-Cultural Moderation

The fourth phase tests a central boundary condition of the theoretical contribution: that the meaning and effect of LSL is culturally dependent. This phase replicates the experimental manipulations used in Phase 3 but recruits participant samples from high-context and low-context cultural environments, following Hall's (1976) classification and informed by Hofstede's (2001) uncertainty-

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

avoidance dimension. The central hypothesis is that an identical silence interval will be interpreted differently across cultural contexts: the same delay may be read as thoughtful deliberation in one setting and as evasion or incompetence in another. Establishing this moderation matters theoretically because it specifies the conditions under which LSL effects emerge or are attenuated, and practically because it bears directly on multinational organisations managing crises among culturally diverse stakeholder populations.

6.5 Illustrative Sector Patterns Guiding Sampling

To guide the sampling frame for Phase 2 and the manipulation levels used in Phase 3, Figure 3 presents an illustrative, literature-informed set of expected silence-duration ranges across the four crisis contexts examined in this programme. These ranges are conceptual estimates intended to inform study design, particularly the selection of "short" and "long" duration anchors for the Phase 3 manipulation and the case-selection criteria for the Phase 2 corpus; they are not reported findings and should not be interpreted as such.

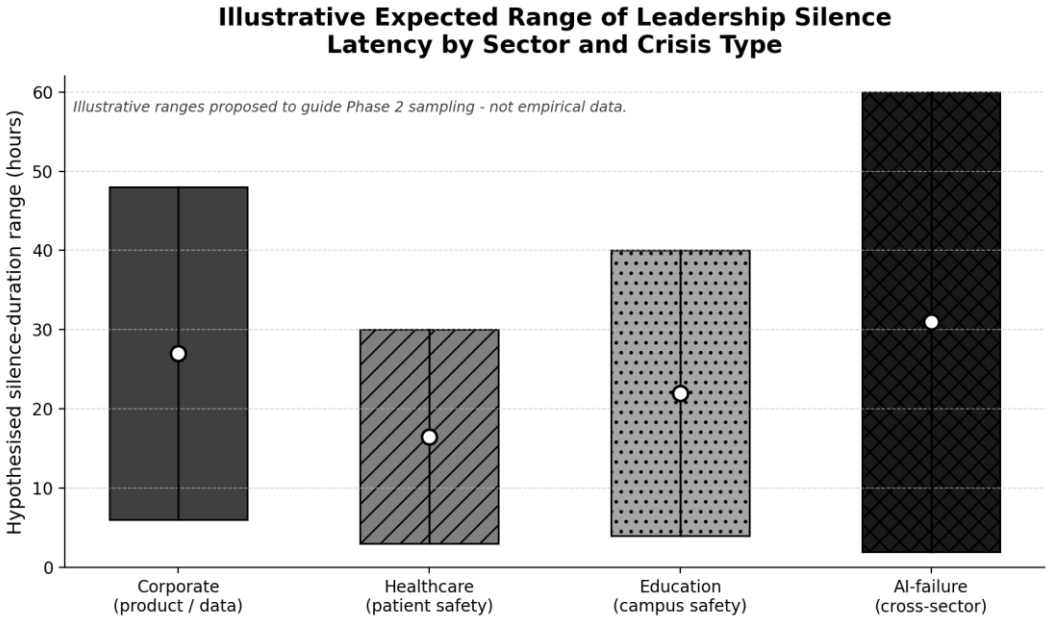


Figure 3. Illustrative expected range of leadership silence latency by sector and crisis type, used to inform Phase 2 sampling criteria and Phase 3 manipulation anchors. Ranges are conceptual, not empirical.7. Anticipated Contribution

Theoretical contribution

Leadership Silence Latency is introduced and formally defined as a new construct in crisis leadership communication, together with its boundary conditions, attribution and cultural context, and its relationship to existing transparency-versus-ambiguity frameworks (Section 5). By locating LSL within, rather than outside, established crisis communication, trust-repair, and cross-cultural theory, the framework is positioned to extend rather than compete with the dominant paradigms reviewed in Section 2.

Methodological contribution

The programme offers a replicable protocol for coding real-world crisis timelines by silence duration and placement (Phase 2); an experimental design that isolates the causal effect of message timing from the causal effect of message content (Phase 3); and a repeated-measures approach to trust recovery that

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

captures the shape and pace of recovery rather than a single snapshot (Phases 3 and 4).

Practical contribution

The programme is designed to yield an evidence-based framework that leaders and communication practitioners can use to manage silence strategically during a crisis, including sector-specific and culturally sensitive guidance on how long a leader can remain silent, and under what attribution conditions, before measurable trust recovery is affected.

8. Practical Implications

The LSL framework is intended to shift the practitioner's guiding question from the traditional "what should we say?" to the more actionable "how much time do we have, and does it matter who is seen as responsible for using it?" Findings from this research programme are intended to inform crisis communication protocols by identifying approximate thresholds beyond which silence duration becomes counterproductive to trust recovery, and by clarifying whether a fast response from any available spokesperson outperforms a delayed response from a designated leader, or vice versa, for organisations whose stakeholders span diverse cultural norms of communication. Sector-specific implications are outlined below.

8.1 Corporate Sector

In corporate settings, where crises frequently involve product failures, data breaches, or executive misconduct, LSL findings are intended to help communication teams calibrate the trade-off between the time needed for legal review and fact-finding and the reputational cost of visible silence. The attribution split is likely to be especially relevant here, since corporate stakeholders may attribute a slow response either to a specific executive or to a diffuse, systemic organisational process, with potentially different consequences for brand trust.

8.2 Healthcare Sector

In healthcare, where public trust is closely tied to perceived institutional responsiveness and patient safety, generalisations drawn from corporate crisis communication research may not transfer directly. The LSL programme's inclusion of a healthcare-specific case subsample (Phase 2) and its treatment of sector as a design variable are intended to generate guidance calibrated to the distinctive stakes and stakeholder expectations of clinical and public-health crises.

8.3 Education Sector

In education, crises involving campus safety, misconduct allegations, or institutional failures place unique weight on perceived care and accountability toward students, families, and staff. Because educational institutions often operate under distinct governance and disclosure norms relative to corporate organisations, sector-specific findings from this programme are intended to help education leaders determine appropriate response windows without defaulting to corporate crisis playbooks that may not fit their context.

8.4 Multinational and Culturally Diverse Organisations

For organisations whose stakeholders span multiple cultural contexts, the Phase 4 moderation findings are intended to inform a further layer of practical guidance: whether a single global response protocol is advisable, or whether response-timing expectations should be calibrated separately for high-context and low-context stakeholder groups. This has direct implications for multinational corporate communication functions, international healthcare providers, and higher-education institutions with globally distributed student and staff populations, all of which must currently rely on generic timeliness guidance that, as Section 2.7 shows, does not account for documented cross-cultural variation in how a pause before speaking is interpreted.

9. Limitations and Future Research

As with any new research programme, several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The case corpus study in Phase 2 relies on publicly available indicators of crisis outcomes and on

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

timelines reconstructed from public records and media coverage; these sources are unlikely to capture internal employee trust with the same precision as controlled survey instruments, and reconstructed timelines are inherently subject to the limitations of what was publicly documented and when. The experimental study in Phase 3, while offering causal leverage that the case corpus study cannot, relies on simulated crisis scenarios that cannot fully replicate the emotional intensity and reputational stakes of a genuine organisational crisis. In Phase 4, high-context and low-context culture is operationalised at the level of participant samples, a simplification that understates the substantial variation in communication norms that exists both within and between national and organisational cultures.

Future research building on this framework could examine how LSL effects vary with organisational size and public visibility; extend the attribution split beyond the leader/organisation dichotomy to include, for example, third-party-caused delay in AI-failure crises; and investigate whether baseline expectations for response time differ systematically across industries in ways that the present four-phase design does not fully capture. Longitudinal replication of the Phase 2 case corpus, extending the observation window well beyond the initial crisis response, would also help clarify whether the trust-recovery trajectories hypothesised in Section 6.3 persist, plateau, or reverse over longer time horizons than the present programme is designed to observe.

10. Conclusion

For decades, crisis communication research has counselled leaders to think carefully about what they say when a crisis strikes. A related and comparatively neglected question is how long they wait, and whom stakeholders hold responsible for that wait, before they say anything at all. This article has argued that this waiting period is not a communicative void but a measurable, interpretable signal in its own right, and it has introduced Leadership Silence Latency as the construct designed to capture it.

The four-phase programme proposed here moves from the conceptualisation of LSL, through the observation of real crisis cases, to controlled experimentation and cross-cultural boundary testing, with the aim of establishing LSL as a construct capable of extending and enriching current crisis leadership theory. In doing so, the programme is intended to provide organisations and their leaders with practical, sector-specific, and culturally informed guidance on how to manage silence during the periods when it matters most: the hours, days, or weeks before a leader speaks, when stakeholders are already listening closely to what is not being said.

REFERENCES

Benoit, W. L. (1995). Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies. State University of New York Press.

Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. Public Relations Review, 23(2), 177-186.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. Human Communication Research, 1(2), 99-112.

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organisation reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. Corporate Reputation Review, 10(3), 163-176.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (1996). Communication and attributions in a crisis: An experimental study in crisis communication. Journal of Public Relations Research, 8(4), 279-295.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. Management Communication Quarterly, 16(2), 165-186.

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

DiFonzo, N., & Bordia, P. (2007). Rumor psychology: Social and organizational approaches. American Psychological Association.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), 350-383.

Eisenberg, E. M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organisational communication. Communication Monographs, 51(3), 227-242.

Ferrin, D. L., Kim, P. H., Cooper, C. D., & Dirks, K. T. (2007). Silence speaks volumes: The effectiveness of reticence in comparison to apology and denial for responding to integrity- and competence-based trust violations. Journal of Applied Psychology, 92(4), 893-908.

Hall, E. T. (1976). Beyond culture. Anchor Books.

Hofstede, G. (2001). Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations (2nd ed.). Sage.

Kim, P. H., Dirks, K. T., Cooper, C. D., & Ferrin, D. L. (2006). When more blame is better than less: The implications of internal vs. external attributions for the repair of trust after a competence- vs. integrity-based trust violation. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 99(1), 49-65.

Kim, P. H., Ferrin, D. L., Cooper, C. D., & Dirks, K. T. (2004). Removing the shadow of suspicion: The effects of apology versus denial for repairing competence- versus integrity-based trust violations. Journal of Applied Psychology, 89(1), 104-118.

Loof, T., Ehlers, R., Lobo Paes, J., Haider, P., & Spinks, R. (2023). The use of artificial intelligence in crisis communication: A study of public perceptions and trust of AI. Iowa Journal of Communication, 55(2), Article 4.

Men, L. R. (2014). Strategic internal communication: Transformational leadership, communication channels, and employee satisfaction. Management Communication Quarterly, 28(2), 264-284.

Milliken, F. J., Morrison, E. W., & Hewlin, P. F. (2003). An exploratory study of employee silence: Issues that employees don't communicate upward and why. Journal of Management Studies, 40(6), 1453-1476.

Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. Academy of Management Review, 25(4), 706-725.

Pinder, C. C., & Harlos, K. P. (2001). Employee silence: Quiescence and acquiescence as responses to perceived injustice. Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management, 20, 331-369.

Sturges, D. L. (1994). Communicating through crisis: A strategy for organizational survival. Management Communication Quarterly, 7(3), 297-316.

Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2019). Effective crisis communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Utz, S., Schultz, F., & Glocka, S. (2013). Crisis communication online: How medium, crisis type and emotions affected public reactions in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Public Relations Review, 39(1), 40-46.

Van Dyne, L., Ang, S., & Botero, I. C. (2003). Conceptualizing employee silence and employee voice as multidimensional constructs. Journal of Management Studies, 40(6), 1359-1392.

Zaremba, A. J. (2010). Organisational silence: A hidden threat to recovery. Business Expert Press.